A CENTURY OF A GEORGIA PLANTATION

By E. Merton Coulter

This is the story of the rise, progress, and decline of a plantation — a story that is not only typical of many other plantations in the South, but symbolic of various characteristics which set the South apart in romance and reality.[1] It was located in Columbia County, Georgia, about a dozen miles up the Savannah River from Augusta. It had its beginning soon after the War of 1812. Black men were brought into wild lands to hew down green pine forests and thickets of sweetgums, festooned with bramble briers and yellow jassamines, to make way for fields of white cotton. The day of the planter had dawned.

The people who came to this plantation, like many others who settled in Georgia and the Southeast, migrated from Virginia. Through marriage and inheritance the lords of this plantation bore such names as Keith and Jones and Wilkinson. They built a comfortable home (though not with white columns and wide verandas), and they applied the secret of living well and genteelly with what time and money they could command. There was not a great deal of leisure on this plantation for anyone — not nearly as much as tradition would have it. The master, though subletting much work to the overseer, had the general cares and oversight, which could not be escaped; the mistress had much sewing to do for the slaves; the children must attend school; and of course the slaves must be more or less constantly at work, for they existed for no other purpose. So, little leisure was left for anyone; yet the planter took rather regularly the Augusta *Chronicle & Sentinel* and the *Constitutionalist,* and the last decade before the Civil War found him a reader of the New York *Ledger* and the New York *Herald.* He read few books; the only deference to them in the written remains of this plantation is found in the will of one of its lords.

[1] This study is based upon about five thousand plantation documents now in the possession of the author.

Yet there was no lack of appreciation for educational polish. The children attended the County Line Academy at five dollars a quarter for tuition, and studied French and the classics. When they grew older they attended the University of Georgia, Emory College, and Georgetown University in Washington. A daughter of the family, in order to be a true representative of ante-bellum society, went away to a boarding-school, and what could be more proper than to go to one in Virginia![2]

Here this young girl, by name Sarah Jane Jones, went through all the romantic feelings, heart-flutters, and developments of character and polish that attached themselves to the planter's daughter of history. It was soon evident from her letters back home that she was studying nothing very seriously except how to become a fine lady. "Our dancing school is over," she wrote, "and I hope I have improved in my dancing. I am still taking music lessons and I have learned the Star Spangle Banner and I am now learning the Mermaid's Waltz." Her piano tuner was a "piano maker and plays himself and speaks nine different languages." She begged her family in one of her letters to send her brothers to a singing school in order that they might be able to sing with her when she should return.

But mostly it was the eternal feminine in her that cropped out. She had scarcely arrived in Virginia before she was writing, "I expect that I am so much grown that you would not know me. I am wearing long dresses and I look very tall but not very large and you will soon have to dress me like a young lady, but I dont think of turning out as I am not allowed to think of beaus. I wish when you come on you will bring all my mother's jewelry as all the girls are wearing it and I would like to have mine. I shall take good care of it as it was my mother's." Jewelry was much on her mind. What she inherited from her mother did not seem to be enough. Wise, though young, she wrote her father, "I write to tell you that I have gotten the ear rings and the price of them is 8 dollars and I got a breast pin that cost 11 dollars and I can nearly pay for it and will you give me 4 more which will pay for it and I would like to get a bracelet to suit the ear rings and breast pin if you will send me

[2] At Warrenton in Fauquier County. The time was during the early eighteen hundred fifties.

enough money to get them please write to me as soon as you get this so that I may pay for them."

In all the gaiety of school life and visitings at White Sulphur Springs and other watering places, this Georgia school girl remembered the slaves with affection (always calling them servants). "Give my love to all the servants and tell them I want to see them" is a typical expression. Yet she came near forgetting her native state, so much did she like the life of Virginia. Her uncle wrote: "She continues to protest vehemently against returning to Georgia, and I do not wonder at her dislike to leave Fauquier, for it is certainly the most fascinating country on the face of the globe." One day she wrote her father, "There is a great deal of courting and marrying going on now among my most intimate friends." She did not, however, succumb to a Cavalier; she returned to Georgia, married, and spent the remainder of her life on a plantation.

Another belle on this Columbia County plantation was Judith Keith, a ward of the lord of the plantation, who inherited great wealth from her father. She developed extravagant tastes there, unaided by the splendor of Virginia watering places and boarding-schools. Though abundantly able, she never attended school outside of Columbia County. Among the articles of splendor which Miss Judith considered necessary to make her a fine lady in Georgia were: neck ribbons, worked collars, silk shawls (fancy and plain, large and small, and of the blanket variety), kid gloves and long picnic gloves, silk mittens, hooks and eyes and pins, feather fans (blue and otherwise), muslin, side combs and shell tuck combs, silk handkerchiefs, white silk hose, velvet ribbons and bunches of artificial flowers, white satins and satin ribbons, linen tape, daisy buttons, cord and tassels, "Marsales skirts," cashmere gloves, French marked collars, fancy handkerchiefs, Moselle fans, blue and pink muslins, fig lace, Moravian hose, chenille, English silk hose, parasol, and thirteen pairs of kid slippers a year, as well as yards of calico (plain, English, and German), brown Holland, and Irish linen. Miss Judith soon married, as might well be guessed, and moved on to the newer lands and greater fortunes to be found in Alabama, another recruit for the great migration to the Southwest, which had long been going on.

What of the lord of the plantation and the larger family life? Equipped with a $125 gold watch, which he bought in Liverpool, and a spy glass, which was kept repaired for him in Augusta, he was enabled to wander over his plantation and keep time on his laborers and espy them from afar. A shower bath, which cost $50, awaited him after his day's activities. But he had leisure enough to make him a gentleman, and ability enough to act the part. He frequently made trips out of the state, principally northward, both for pleasure and profit. He spent a considerable part of the time on his trips at watering places, and when in the cities stopped at the best hotels. He visited such resorts as Saratoga Springs (stopping always at Congress Hall and never spending less than a week), Montvale Springs, Rockbridge Alum Springs, Warm Springs, and Sharon Springs. When in New York, he stopped at the Astor House, and when he visited Washington he stayed at the National Hotel and Brown's Marble Hotel. He must not only act the part of a gentleman, he must dress the part. In 1857, he replenished his wardrobe in this wise: a black frock coat, Cass pants, silk vest, raglan overcoat, fan Cass frock coat, three pairs of pants, three Cass vests (check, mixed, and black), nine shirts (three merino), six pairs of half-hose, two stocks, silk handkerchiefs, a hair brush, a clothes brush, and a pair of Cass gloves.

At home there must be leisure and gentility. Picnics, with boards of managers and printed formal invitations, were frequently given. Evenings at parties and dances came now and then. A mid-summer entertainment in 1855 called for these purchases: raisins, currants, citrons, cinnamon, cloves, nutmegs, brandy, wine, mackerel, pulverized sugar, pickles, cheese, a basket of champagne, assorted cordials, almonds, candy kisses, candles, yeast powders, pepper, vinegar, a large tub, tea, coffee, salt, ginger, gelatine, lemon and vanilla extracts, and sugar ornaments. For the proper celebration of Christmas (1840) by a southern planter the following was required: six and one-half gallons of whiskey, twenty-nine gallons of wine, and half a gallon of brandy.

Plantations could not have arisen without slavery, and without forced labor they could not have continued long. Slaves not only meant labor but they meant capital. The supply must al-

ways be kept up, and a few more than necessary could always be disposed of. Scarcely a year went by without new purchases. In 1836, $5,000 was invested in slaves. There were about seventy-five slaves on this plantation and one hundred and forty on an adjoining one, which in 1842, largely came to be combined with the first through inheritance and purchase. With such a large number, the degree of personal contact and affection between master and servant is surprising. As previously indicated, members of the family away on visits were almost as mindful in their letters of the servants as they were of brothers and sisters and parents.

Marshall Keith, who died in 1841, and whose plantation came to be largely identified with the one under discussion, showed in his will remarkable consideration for his slaves.[3] Some he willed to his various kinsfolk, others he left to be sold with the estate. Freedom in Liberia he willed to three. "I give to the Secretary of the Colonization Society the following negroes vizt. Alfred, Daniel, and Thornton for the purpose of being sent to Liberia and also five shares of the Mechanics Bank of Augusta for each, the proceeds to be paid to them or the survivor on their arrival in Liberia and for no other use or purpose & as I leave it optional with them to go or not should they or either of them refuse," then they should be held by the executors of the estate for various uses.

Even a more remarkable consideration for his slaves he showed in this provision of his will: "It is my desire my servant Ishmael should be freed but if that cannot be accomplished I give him to my executors hereinafter named in trust for his own use to go wherever he may please, and if it suits him to take with him or sell or dispose of the property hereinafter devised to my executors in trust for said Ishmael." Thereupon Keith willed him one hundred fifty shares of stock of the Mechanics Bank of Augusta and a tract of land for a home for him and for his two sisters, Minny and Elizabeth. But what good was a plantation, however small it might be, without slaves? So Keith then did quite an unusual thing: He willed to those three negroes whom he had set free, twelve of his slaves, together

[3] A copy of this will is on file in the courthouse of Columbia County, at Appling. The will was made, May 8, 1839 and was recorded, Jan. 6, 1842.

with blacksmith tools, cart and oxen, a horse, three mules, a sufficient stock of cattle, sheep, and hogs, household furniture, and enough corn, fodder, and pork to last for one year. To Minny he gave one hundred shares of Mechanics Bank stock, together with two slaves, household furniture, a spinning wheel, and a loom. To Elizabeth he gave fifteen shares of bank stock and household furniture; and to other negroes he gave bank stock and other property. The will then charged the executors not to "suffer those servants I have freed or left in trust to live in or within three miles of any Town or village in Georgia or Carolina."

By usage in the commonwealth of Georgia, negroes set free from slavery were required to move beyond the limits of the state.[4] So Ishmael, his mother Nancy, and his two sisters, Minny and Elizabeth, started upon their journey northward into the land of snowy winters. They crossed the Ohio and settled in and around Cincinnati.

In southern Ohio they bought flat corn lands and began farming, but everything was so different; the floods covered their lands with water, the winters were bitterly cold — they were soon longing for their old Georgia plantation and friends again. The negroes who were freed to go to Liberia refused to go, and were permitted to remain in America. They went to Ohio and helped to add to the discontent of Ishmael and his group. The Ohio freedmen constantly wrote endearing letters to their former Georgia white acquaintances, for, in the words of one, "nothing affords more pleasure than to hear from my native state and those with whom I have spent out the greater part of my days with." Ishmael wrote in 1844: "Old Man Ned is very anxious to return and so is Alfred they have been prevailing with me to return with them as for myself I need not Say as you know what my wishes on that point knowing that I should be infringing the laws of the country to return thence[5] and also being myself liable when I could have no protection unless

[4] State law forbade the liberation of slaves without permission of the legislature. The law was often ignored and the courts were liberal in its interpretation. See T. R. R. Cobb (ed.), *A Digest of the Statute Laws of the State of Georgia* (Athens, 1851), 983, 991, 1125.

[5] See *ibid.*, 990, 1009.

there had been something done in my favor which I suppose could be by the interposition of friends."

These expatriated freedmen never expected further happiness except it be with their former white friends either in Georgia or in heaven. Their chances of returning to Georgia seemed remote, so they concentrated their attention on heaven. Their letters generally closed in this wise: "I may never see you all again in this world should we not may we meet in the Sweet fields of elesian where we shall be done with the troubles of this unfriendly world." The longings of Old Ned are set forth in this letter of his own hand and composition: "I have met with the opportunity of writing you a few lines to inform you of my present situation which is very disagreeable. I have now a better opportunity of giving you farther ac Count of this Country than I had in other letter this Climate is two colde for me I want to come back to georgia a gain and bring my family if I could be permitted to return. I wish that I was just back there in that settlement a gain doing the work of that settlement

"I have tride Cincinnati & have tried here but there is no chance for me to live here I have worked very hard since I have been here & I am now in very bad helth but I hope that thes feu lines may find you all well & my love to you & family an all the rest of the friends tell my Children howdy and all of rest of my friend

"if you will permit me to come back will you be so kind as to write me if I Can Come I will try to start next September you need not to put yourself to the trouble of Sending as you promist I will try to come myself. . . . I want to hear very bad how you all are getting along and how the crops are nothing more but remaining your humble servant

Edward Keith [Old Ned]"

This group of Ohio freedmen was in fact much better off in material wealth than the majority of people in Ohio. They sold their possessions in Georgia, including most of their slaves, and on their 285 shares of bank stock they drew yearly dividends as high as $1,100. By 1849 they had received almost $30,000 from their Georgia rights and properties.

But what was the lot of the slaves who were doomed to live

on this Georgia plantation? They seem to have had no desire to exchange places with their Ohio friends. There was only one runaway whose escapade was recorded in the plantation chronicles, where it is written that he ran southward, only to be taken in Savannah and returned. The slaves planted their small patches of corn and cotton and vegetables from which they added to their table and to their supply of money, for they were allowed to sell their corn and cotton. When they became sick, or believed themselves to be so, the plantation doctor put in his appearance with his pills and his blisterings and his bleedings. Some years his bill for services ran up almost to $200, and it was the planter's especial duty to meet the expenses of his sick slaves. Sometimes the planters themselves fell sick, and then the doctor brought out more elaborate remedies, which might from their variety of smells and tastes cure patients more sick in mind than body. A mélange administered to a lord of 140 slaves and 4,000 acres of land in 1841 follows: tonic, pills (plain, quinine, and chalybeate), chloric ether, ash solution, tartar emitic, camphor, jalap, calomel, nutmegs, cinnamon, Drover's powders, sulphuric morphine, zinc sulphate, castor oil, nitro muriatic acid, and copperas. The patient died.

As heretofore stated, this plantation had about seventy-five slaves upon it; its acreage was from 2,000 to 3,000. Land was added now and then, but seldom was any sold. Like many other planters, the lord of this plantation, being really a capitalist applying his resources to farming, owned land in other parts of the state. His first interest was in producing cotton, but this was by no means his only important concern. He raised much corn and produced a great deal of pork. He believed in mixed husbandry and practiced it. In 1850, besides his 73 slaves, he had 95 cattle, 80 sheep, 17 mules, 4 horses, and a carriage worth $450. He owned 2,167 acres of land and raised on it 108 bales of cotton and 4,700 bushels of corn. In 1856 he produced 6,207 pounds of pork, "102 bales [of cotton] the shortest crop I ever made," which he sold for $4,653.91, and 4,500 bushels of corn. In 1858 his cotton crop amounted to 136 bales selling for $6,386. This year he planted 415 acres of cotton and 320 acres of corn.

In 1861 there began such a revolution as has fallen to the lot of but few peoples in the world's history to suffer. William

Jones, the lord of the plantation at this time, could not have foreseen what was in store for his organized form of existence, both economic and social, but he had belonged to a political school which had greatly mistrusted the Democrats, who were in charge of the present developments. Like his fellows all over the South, he was carried away by the enthusiasm for the new world that so many thought was fast approaching. Even before Georgia had joined in the movement, he and others organized the Fredonia Guards and mutually pledged themselves "to protect each other our families Homes and property to the best of our ability and to enforce the Laws of [our] Beloved State."[6] Against what enemy were they organizing? They, forgetful of every thing they had ever learned throughout their lives, had hazy notions and fears that the enslaved black man would arise and smite his master — how unjustly they were misjudging him, four years of desolating war would show.

Fighting soon began, but not in Columbia County, Georgia, nor was it ever to spread its horrors over the corn and cotton fields and into the big house and negro cabins of this plantation. Yet the effects of the great tragedy were soon being felt. One of the lord's sons bade his family and the servants farewell and went off to Augusta to join the armies of the Confederate States of America. Three months later the other son went to Savannah to join the forces assembling there to drive out the invaders. The war continued with increasing fury until white men fighting themselves blue, began calling upon black men to help. As Sherman sought to break through the mountain barriers into the heart of Georgia, slaves from this Savannah River plantation were called away to Atlanta to work upon the fortifications, and black Moses was sent into the Confederate armies to cook until physical disabilities got for him an honorable discharge which he carried back as proudly as the proudest Anglo-Saxon.

Columbia County knew there was war not only because slaves and planter's sons marched away, but also because the families of poor people became hungry and ragged — their heads and older sons had also marched away to join a war they had had

[6] This is quoted from the articles of agreement, which contains a list of the volunteers.

no conscious part in bringing on. The lord of the plantation was now selected by the inferior court, to feed these hungry families, using money provided by the government. The Confederate Government itself became poor and hungry, as the war dragged on; and then it made a law that all large planters must give to it one-tenth of their agricultural products.[7] So well did this law work that the Jones plantation gave 1440 pounds of pork to a government whose chief support had collapsed fifteen days previously.

Though King Cotton had given the South great confidence and faith in the ultimate attainment of everything they might desire, scarcely had the war begun before the cry went up that cotton must be dethroned and corn and other food crops must take his place. Laws were enacted in Georgia against the fallen idol, and patriotism was measured by how much it was detested and spurned. By 1862 the cotton crop on this plantation had dropped to 41 bales, and by 1864 the pork production had mounted to 11,119 pounds. In addition to large corn crops, wheat and oats were being raised. Patriotic, indeed, was the lord of this plantation with sons and slaves in the army, with cotton pulled down, with food crops elevated, and with time and money spent in feeding the families of the Confederate poor.

Sherman pierced the heart of the Confederacy with fire and lance; and soon the leader of a once-mighty power was fleeing for safety. The dream of millions a few years before had now forever vanished as the South awoke to defeat, degradation, and ruin. The accumulations of a century socially, politically, and economically were forever swept away. Everything must be constructed anew from a void. Writes one sufferer, "The close of the war has left us in a bad fix in common with every one else in this country rendering the rich poor & the poor destitute. No class of society & scarcely any individual has escaped its desolating influence."[8]

The lord of a plantation with three-quarters of a hundred black retainers, restless and free, must now count as less than nothing his four years of patriotic support of a fallen govern-

[7] J. C. Schwab, *The Confederate States of America, 1861-1865* (New York, 1901), 292.

[8] From James Keith, Warrenton, Virginia, Sept. 26, 1865.

ment. He must now take an oath of allegiance to a new power bent upon the utter destruction of the social and economic organization that had made him a gentleman, that had given him time to be cultured, but an organization that had robbed black men of their liberty — something they missed not nearly so much as people far away, who knew not the negro, thought. In the summer of 1865, Mr. Jones had more than 2,000 acres of land but no workmen. He was in a desperate plight; his crops must be cultivated and later harvested. In May he made an agreement with freedmen Dred and Sam and all the others. He would pay them one-half of all the corn, peas, fodder, wheat, cotton, and oats, "and they on their part promise to work faithfully and to obey all orders issued or given to them by the employer or his agent — and should they become troublesome or disobey any order that is given them they are to leave the place or plantation on which they are living immediately and forfeit all claims, rights, or interest in the crops above mentioned."

Here was Jones's solution of his labor problem; but would the guardians of all those black men set free approve it? The agent of the Freedmen's Bureau replied, "I recommend to all hands on Mr. Jones'es plantation to accept the terms herein proposed assuring them that it is the best they can do at present. The understanding is that no punishment is to be inflicted by the employer or his agent and all difficulty between the employer and negroes is to be settled at this office." The result was that these freedmen would rather have money in their pockets than the promise of part of a crop — so money they got, which meant freedom from immediate economic restraint.

But the freedmen were too prone to believe that freedom meant escape, not only from all the old rules but also from all labor, and that it gave them the right to attach unto themselves anything that might be acquired when no one was looking. Hence it was recorded in the annals of Jones that some of his finest mules were missing the night after New Year's of 1866, and thereupon Jones hired a nightwatchman. Yet he set down in the records this same year, "I have six silver forks & 5 large spoons & 4 tea spoons & 2 butter knives. The balance has been stolen." The first crop under free labor was reduced almost three-fourths in corn and two-thirds in cotton. The running

of the plantation cost him $4,206 and his income was $5,150. Exactly half of his expenses were for negro wages. The next year he paid his freedmen laborers $2,541, and lost on his plantation $611.

The wage system proved to be very unsatisfactory. When money jingled in the pockets of the negro, there was an almost irresistible impulse to flee from work. Soon the owner of these many half-idle acres, now William Harrison Jones, found out that it was better to furnish the land, mules, and a few other necessities and measure his payment to his laborers in the crop raised, either a fixed amount or a percentage. This system appealed to the negro for he was now master. Another method was to rent the land for a money income, as for example, five dollars an acre.

During the 1880's and 1890's these arrangements were being used, but the day of the old plantation had passed. Times, indeed, had changed. The labor force was no longer a unit and it could not be depended upon. The seams of disintegration began to show when twenty-five acre lots were doled out to any comers who would promise to pay the rent. The old home place no longer had its charm as the center of a busy life revolving around a great social and economic establishment. Unlike his ante-bellum predecessor, the owner now became interested in religion and moral reform, taking refuge therein from the thoughts of poverty and thwarted hopes. He became secretary and treasurer of the community Sunday school, calling the roll each Sunday and adding up the pennies — how different from the ante-bellum gentleman calling the roll of his slaves and counting his bales of cotton! Instead of buying his gallons of wines and whiskeys, he now wrote and delivered temperance lectures.

The children of this generation went away to school — but they did not come back. A son was educated at the University of Georgia and became a civil engineer for great railway companies — industry had conquered agriculture with him. A daughter attended the Cincinnati Conservatory of Music and chose the profession of music teacher in states far from Georgia. The old plantation has disintegrated into smaller holdings, while great stretches which once formed an ante-bellum planta-

tion have slid hurridly out of the grasp of man back into green pine forests and thickets of sweetgums, festooned with yellow jassamines and bramble briers. The yard of the old home has grown into a wilderness of sedge grass, and the building has all but tumbled down. From the primeval back to the primeval; the circuit has been completed — and all within a century.